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ABSTRACT

The hypothesis that abused children develop a life style of overt expression of aggression and depression was examined in a study of 56 physically abused first grade children who were placed in foster care due to parental physical abuse. As no test instrument existed, the Childhood Social Functioning Inventory was developed, pretested, and used to perform a multiple stepwise regression analysis of the association among overt aggressive behaviors, learned aggressive patterns of coping, depressive process, and social situation. Other factors considered included the child's behavior, verbal expression, stability of foster home placement, and academic performance. Among characteristics of the Ss were that 55% of the Ss were repeating first grade, all had fractures within the previous 4 years, and 53% were described as coming from middle class homes. Among findings was that the Ss coped with stress in school situations as their parents had coped with stress with them. This self defeating behavior served to further support Ss' already low self image. The Ss responded to parental figures (teachers and foster mothers) with a pattern of simultaneous aggression and depression because of earlier experiences of rejection, thus setting in motion a new pattern for rejection by parental love objects. (PHR)

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AFTER ABUSE:

CHILD COPING PATTERNS AND SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTION

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AFTER ABUSE:

FOSTER CHILD COPING PATTERNS AND SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTION

Despite growth of a preventive family-focused philosophy of service delivery and new family treatment approaches, some physically abused children continue to need specialized care apart from an adverse home environment. This study focuses on the development of aggressive and depressive coping behaviors among six and seven year old foster children who have been physically abused by their own parent(s). Physical abuse in this study has been limited to those situations involving both medical documentation of abuse and court removal of the children from their families.

Existing studies of children in foster care do not provide a comprehensive picture of the child's life in foster care. The majority of the research studies report data about the characteristics of foster children (Jaffee and Kline, 1970; Jeter, 1963; Shapiro, 1973; Stone, 1974) and the duration of foster family care (Fanshel, 1976; Maas and Engler, 1959). Thomas (1967), however, addresses an issue relevant to the present study: resolution of object loss by foster children. She found that, although all of the children showed a reaction to placement, they were already in different grief phases associated with prior losses at the time of placement. Thus, her findings supported Trasler's (1960) earlier report which attributed the foster child's impaired object relationship capacity to parental rejection which could occur prior to placement as well as result from placement. No studies relating to aggressive behavior of foster children were located. Nor were studies located which

specifically related to physically abused foster children. The recent studies of child abuse have tended to focus on the parents rather than the children - the focus of the present study.

Thus, at present, the object relationship style of physically abused children who have been removed from their home environments is not known. Equally important, we do not know if such children are open to working through earlier trauma and to mastering age appropriate developmental tasks in a foster home setting. Exploring only the children's needs, this research study investigates and analyzes the coping behavior of 56 physically abused children in relation to foster family and school. The findings are then applied to social work practice: specifically, to clinical intervention with the children and to collaborative planning with the foster parents.

THE PHYSICALLY ABUSED CHILD

Fontana (1971) describes the personality traits of abusing parents in terms of rigidity, compulsivity, antisocial behavior, and intermittent depressive periods. To this list, Kempe (1972) adds hypersensitivity to criticism and narcissistic orientation. Major defense mechanisms appear to be identification, displacement, and projection. In sum, abusing parents appear to lack a sense of identity and the separateness of an integrated concept of self. They lack a sense of being cared for and about.

Young (1964) describes abusive parents as quick to react and as having poor controls. She found that their aggressive drives were not unusually strong but rather expressed too freely. In addition, abusive parents often report being abused as children and being deprived of basic mothering (Kempe, 1972; Steele and Pollack, 1974). Silver (1969) reported that violence appears to breed violence when the physically abused child identifies with the abusing parent as one means of coping with stressful situations. From these perspectives, a child victim of physical abuse may incorporate patterns of aggression which are repeated within his lifetime and across generations.

From the literature, it appears likely that the children as well as the parents contribute to the destructive parent-child interaction. Stern (1973) reported prematurity as a factor in infants' level of risk. Gil (1970) found that abused boys outnumbered abused girls in every age group below twelve. Studies by Terr (1970) and by Caffey (1972) noted that behavior problems of abused children may contribute to the abusive situations.

Other studies suggest that physically abused children experience difficulty in school as well as in family situations. Thirty-seven percent of the abused children in Glaser's (1968) study had failed first grade work. Reports by Elmer and Gregg (1967) and by Martin (1973) noted that behavior and learning problems were common among the physically abused children whom they studied.

In sum, the physically abused child has received attention within his own family in the forms of criticism, physical attack, and parental demand for perfection. At the time of placement, he experienced the rupturing of a dysfunctional family unit and the loss of an ambivalent parental love

object(s). In the new family setting, the physically abused child is exposed to potentially new self-other relationship patterns. According to Littner's (1956) theoretical perspective, however, the child's defensive-adaptive response to parental rejection may interfere with development of new self-other relationship patterns. Foster children often believe that they were rejected and abandoned for being bad. In an attempt to ward off the devastating knowledge of parental rejection, the children assume a bad guy role. That is, they prefer being bad to considering their parents bad. For the physically abused child, the defensive-adaptive coping with parental rejection and actual loss is combined with the loss of self-well-being through experienced violence. Taken together, the life experiences of the physically abused child in foster care create a negative self image and concomitant negative acts. On this basis, the researcher hypothesized that the children in the present study would attempt to cope with the painful feelings evoked by the pre-placement, placement, and post-placement experiences through both depressive and aggressive behavior.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Sampling

The sample of 56 foster children was drawn from the 529 children in the foster care programs of three public and two voluntary social agencies in three states. The sample included all children who met the following criteria:

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1) medically documented physical abuse, 2) court ordered foster placement, and 3) first grade in school. The medical and legal criteria assured the actual existence of physical abuse. The educational criterion provided an opportunity to observe the children's coping behavior in two social situations: school and foster home.

Generalizability of the findings of the current study of abused children in foster care is limited by the educational, and thereby age, criterion. The researcher thought, however, that an understanding of coping behavior during the abused foster child's early contacts with the educational system would provide clues for early intervention and change. Reliability of the findings is also limited by the small sample size in relation to the universe of 3700 foster children identified as being in care because of active intent on the part of a parent to kill or injure them (Geiser, 1973).

Research Instrument Development

Since no standardized instruments were located to measure aggression and depression as coping behaviors in early latency, behavioral scales were developed on the basis of: 1) definitions of aggression and depression in the professional literature; 2) research studies of physically abused children, abusive parents, and foster children; and 3) the researcher's social work practice experience. The content and structure of the Childhood Social Functioning Inventory was subjected to a three phase validation process. First, a panel of six ACSW judges evaluated the content of each item as: 1) overt aggressive behavior or not and 2) observable behavior or not. All

items with disagreement as to observability or degree of aggressivity were dropped. Second, the six judges used the instrument in a pretest with children. The achieved interrater reliability of .88 was considered satisfactory.

Third, as part of the actual study, a factor analysis of the remaining 20 items yielded a first factor cluster of nine items with overt aggressive behavior content (see Table 1). The items loaded from .561 to .713 and accounted for 47% of the behavioral variance among the children's Inventory scores. Since the behaviors described by teachers and the reasons recorded for second placement were acting out and aggressive behaviors, the findings supported the Overt Aggressive Behavior Factor Scale as indeed measuring the behaviors the scale set out to measure. Thus, the reliability and validity of the measure of aggressive behavior used in the present study were considered acceptable.

Three measures of depression were included in the research design in order to take into account age appropriate expression of childhood depression. First, the psychosocial diagnostic interviews included fantasy material such as the bird and funeral stories from the Despert Fables; draw a picture and tell a story; three wishes; and the happiest, saddest, and angriest times remembered. Previously reported validity and reliability estimates of the Despert Fables were accepted for this study (Fine, 1948). In addition, the fantasy material was scored independently according to a Depressive Theme Scale by two ACSW judges in order to control for rater bias. For example,

TABLE 1
OVERT AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR SCALE

Items Defining Factor	Loadings
Fights with peers	.713
Cruel to animals	.696
Provocative, stirs up trouble	.695
Temper tantrums	.679
Rebels against adult authority	.635
Breaks, damages objects	.630
Unmanageable, disobeys	.612
Angry, hostile to others	.568
Runs away from home, school	.561
Variance accounted for = 47%	
Eigenvalue 6.92	

on a scale of 1-10, presence of ideas about killing self indicated high depression; about being mistreated, low depression. Interrater reliability was +.91.

Second, the child's behavior during the previous month formed the basis for scoring on the Affective Mood Scale. For example, not being responsive to his physical and social environment or severe sleeping and eating disturbances would indicate high depression; some hesitancy in response, low depression. Interrater reliability of +.89 suggested good agreement between foster mother and social worker on observed behavior.

Third, the content of the child's talk during the previous month formed the basis for scoring on the verbal expression scale. Interrater reliability of +.68 between foster mother and social worker was considered adequate. The moderate correlation, however, suggested the possibility of different use of verbal skills by the child when with the social worker and with the foster mother. A strong direct positive correlation ($R = .94$) among the three measures of depression confirmed that the scales provided different ways of measuring the same behavior and increased the validity of the measures.

Stability of foster home placement was measured by the number of homes in which a child had lived at the time of the current study. Performance in school was measured by whether or not a child was repeating first grade.

Data Analysis

Responses in this multivariate field study of 56 physically abused children in foster care were analyzed by both descriptive and inferential statistics. Multiple regression analysis with stepwise procedures was used to study the system or relationships among overt aggressive behavior (dependent variable) and manifestations of depression, performance in school and stability of foster home placement.

An implicit assumption of this study is that the behavior of these physically abused foster children reflects multiple causation. Data analysis identifies associations among the key study variables but causal relationships such as those identified through path analysis were deemed inappropriate for this study.

FINDINGS

Characteristics of the Children

At the time of the study, the 35 boys and 21 girls had been in foster care one to two years. Fifty percent were in their second foster home because the first foster parents had been unable to cope with the fights, disobedience, and property destruction. The 29 white and 27 black children were fairly evenly distributed between the two foster home groupings. Teachers described the six and seven year old children as underachievers, fighters, and rebels against authority. Thirty-one (55.4%) of the 56 first graders were repeating

first grade. Analysis of variance found no statistically significant child demographic data differences among the five public and voluntary agencies.

Of the 53 children for whom some developmental history was available, 43 children (77% of the study population) weighed less than five pounds at birth. The family background of 28 children (53%) was described, but not defined, in the case record as middle class. Detailed case records during the early phases of placement were also available for 53 children. When removed from their homes at ages 4 and 5, they were all described as suspicious, frightened, and responsive to adult moods. Within the first year, the noted behaviors included lying, stealing, cruelty, hitting, biting, defiance, and enuresis. At least one of these behaviors was used in describing each of the 53 children.

Physical examination at the time of placement documented new fractures (52%), burns (21%), bruises and abrasions (89%), and two to four old fractures (100%). A recurring comment by pediatricians was "poor physical condition."

In summary, the characteristics of the abused foster children in this study appear to support DeFrances' (1971) assertion that the past and present functioning of abused children suggests a level of deviance in excess of the functioning of the child population at large. In view of the previously mentioned limitations of sampling procedures, small sample size, and absence of a "normal" control group, however, no attempt will be made to generalize the current findings beyond the group of children studied. Rather, the objective is to stimulate the reader to re-think the treatment needs of

physically abused children who need foster caring. (Although the author recognizes that evaluation and treatment of the parents of children in foster care are key components in rehabilitation, these dimensions are beyond the scope of this study.)

Generation Repetition of Depressive Behavior Patterns

In the current study, the finding that 80% of the abusive episodes precipitating placement occurred during acts of feeding or cleaning in which the child "just wouldn't shut up crying" appears related to parental difficulty in maintaining an attitude of motherliness. Clinical data suggests that this difficulty in parenting is often related to depressions. In view of such distorted parent-child interaction, the loss of self-well-being associated with physical violence, and actual separation from the family, the researcher anticipated that the study children would be depressed. The range of affective mood scores (1-10 out of a possible 21) and a mean of 3 (1-3 = high depression) confirmed the research hypothesis that this sample of physically abused children in foster care would measure high on depression. Deprived of basic mothering, these children do indeed cope with the painful feelings related to multiple losses through depressive responses. Without corrective experiences, it seems likely that these children may continue depressive responses on into adulthood and parenthood.

Generation Repetition of Aggressive Behavior Patterns

In view of both the life experiences and the opportunities for observational learning, the researcher anticipated that the physically abused children in

the study would behave aggressively. The moderately strong relationship ($r = +.67$) between school failure and overt expression of aggression together with the teachers' descriptions suggested that the children were quick to react and had poor controls in school situations. In other words, the study children tended to strike out aggressively and repetitively at others in response to stress just as their parents had done with them. Thus, the children appeared to be coping with school stress through self-defeating aggressive behavior which in turn supported their negative self-images. Without corrective experiences, it seems likely that this pattern of aggressive behavior will continue into adulthood and possibly be re-enacted from generation to generation.

In addition, the strong relationship ($r = +.79$) between foster home replacement and overt expression of aggression suggested that repetition compulsion of aggressive behavior was operative within the social relationships of these children. That is, the foster children repeatedly attempted to re-enact with foster parents the pathological relationship with their natural parents in order to reconfirm their anxieties around rejection and their negative self-images.

Repetition Compulsion in Social Functioning

In view of the physical abuse experiences, the opportunities for observational learning to externalize feelings, and the actual parental losses of the foster children in this study, the researcher hypothesized that there would be an association among overt aggressive behavior, depression, school performance

and social functioning in the foster home (i.e., foster home replacement). In order to assess which combinations of the independent variables most influenced overt expression of aggression, a multiple regression analysis with stepwise procedures was computed. The coefficient of multiple correlation ($R = .81$) indicated a strong relationship between overt expression of aggression and affective mood depressive themes, fantasy depressive themes, foster home replacement, verbal expression of depressive themes, and repeating first grade (see Table 2). Thus, 65% of the variability ($R^2 = .65$) in overt aggressive behavior among the sample was explained by the known variance on the linear combination of predictors.

When children's patterns of communication are taken into account, it is not surprising that 55% of the difference in degree of overt aggression among the 56 foster children in this study was accounted for by behavioral (44%) and fantasy (11%) measures of depressive process. In other words, children tend to translate impulse and affect into action behaviors. In addition, since conceptual thinking and reality testing are immaturely developed in early latency, six and seven year olds may also contain impulse and affect on a fantasy level.

The strong simultaneous association among overt aggressive behaviors, depressive process, and two social situations involving parental figures (teacher, foster mother) differs from Despert's (1952) conclusion that the coincidence of depression and aggression manifests either singularly or alternately. Rather, the current study suggests a third pattern of coping with a coincidence of aggressive impulse and depressive process in social situations involving parental figures - that is, a pattern of simultaneous manifestation of aggression and depression.

TABLE 2
MULTIPLE STEPWISE REGRESSION MODEL OF OVERT AGGRESSION

Source of Variance	Multiple R	R ²	R ² Change	B Values	Beta Values
Affective Mood Behavioral					
Depressive Themes	.666	.444	.444	4.891	1.062
Fantasy Content					
Depressive Themes	.747	.558	.114	0.487	0.360
Foster Home Replacement	.757	.573	.016	0.486	0.499
Verbal Expression					
Depressive Themes	.761	.580	.006	5.303	1.739
Repeating First Grade	.805	.548	.068	0.815	0.399
Totals:					
	n = 56	R = .81			
	p .05	R ² = .65			

As symbolic representations of earlier rejecting parental figures, the foster mother and first grade teacher appear to stimulate recognition of aggressive impulse and depressive process. The inference, therefore, is that exposure to the positive feelings of a parental figure brings to the child's consciousness: 1) a positive desire for lost nurturance and affection; 2) negative feelings about past parent-child experiences which reinforced worthless feelings; 3) fear of not living up to high performance expectations and demands which were established through past parental role reversal; and 4) a repetitive aggressive style of relating to adults which the child learned from parental violence. It seems likely that the six and seven year old foster child's defensive adaptive coping strategies are insufficient to cope with the strong feelings elicited. It also seems probable that simultaneous behavioral manifestation of aggressive impulse and depressive process repeatedly pushes away new parental figures. Thereby, the child's overt behavior sets in motion a repetition compulsion pattern of social situations characterized by rejection by parental love objects.

CHILD TREATMENT IMPLICATIONS

The findings suggest that both foster parents and social workers need to use the social treatment tools of foster caring and growth-inducing relationship experiences with these physically abused children in order to change both sense of self and self-other behavior. The task at hand is to build the abused child's ego capacity to the point that the child can use the foster family relationships in order to: 1) work through his loss and

grief; 2) build social relationships; 3) enhance his self image; and 4) decrease his self-defeating aggressive actions. The four pronged treatment framework for these children involves both relational and situational intervention techniques.

For example, at the time the child enters placement, he is attempting to separate from his own family and to establish relationships with new parental figures. Since he has left a familiar world for a strange one, the physically abused foster child needs emotional support, actual and symbolic feeding, and specific information from foster parents and social worker about his new life. In addition to having his dependency needs met, the physically abused child needs to experience the grief process inherent in parental loss (whether the loss is temporary or permanent) in order to resume the developmental tasks of childhood. According to Fraiberg (1962), such grief work involves moving through phases of: 1) grief and withdrawal; 2) emotional neutrality; 3) negative and hostile feelings toward parent substitutes; 4) ambivalence; and 5) finally, establishment of new relationships of affection and trust with the foster parents and social worker.

The current separation and loss experience carries with it the threat of future losses as well as serving as a reminder of past unresolved losses. Before the abused child can learn to cope fully with future loss, however, he must first relive and work through the earlier loss traumas associated with physical abuse and neglect. He must deal with the real events and also with his perception of the events; that is, the personal meaning with which he endows a real event. To accomplish this therapeutic task, the abused child

and social worker communicate about earlier and current losses through play activities involving dolls, stories, and other media. According to the child's readiness and ability, the therapeutic interpretations progress within the play process from the observable level (Baby doll hit mama doll.), to the feeling level (Maybe baby doll is mad at mama doll?). When the child's play indicates that the child is functioning on the feeling level within the play process, the social worker draws on background knowledge of the child to understand what triggered the feelings and then interprets within the play activity (I wonder if mama doll hurt baby doll first?). Again, according to the abused child's readiness, the social worker next moves from interpretation within the play process to a more generalizable interpretation (You know, maybe you have even felt that way sometimes?). Thus, over a period of time (which may involve few or many sessions) and with many variations on the central theme of loss, the physically abused child in foster care is provided with a corrective growth experience.

In addition to the grief work with the child related to the current loss and the therapeutic work with the child related to past loss, both social worker and foster parents align themselves with that part of the child struggling toward conflict resolution and growth. Within the minutiae of daily life events, they help the child work on specific day-to-day problems of coping with loss related to ending events (bedtime), with loss of possessions and other extensions of the self (breaking a toy), and with loss of self-esteem (losing a game). The self-defeating aggressive behavior associated with these daily events reflects both the abused child's expressed inability to cope with loss and the child's learned pattern of expressing feelings.

Therefore, immediate attention by foster parents prevents aggressive behavior buildup and also teaches new skills in coping with loss related feelings and with the affects in general.

SUMMARY

The researcher hypothesized that a child victim of physical abuse, who has been removed from his family, develops a life style of overt expression of aggression and depression. Theoretical perspectives and research methodology were combined to study the social functioning of 56 physically abused children in the social environments of school and foster home as associated with patterns of coping with early abuse and deprivation and patterns of coping with actual parent-child separation and loss. A multiple stepwise regression analysis of the association among overt aggressive behaviors, learned aggressive patterns of coping, depressive process, and social situation obtained a Multiple R of .81 which was significant at the .05 level. Inspection of the social situations suggested that in situations which stimulated concomitant recognition of aggressive impulse and depressive process, the children in this study resorted to earlier learned patterns of coping with overwhelming feelings. Although not generalized beyond the physically abused foster children in this study, the findings suggest that the long range social work goal is to break both the repetition compulsion pattern of overt expression of aggression and depression within the child's current social situations and the repetition pattern of aggressive/abusive behavior between parent and child which reoccurs in succeeding generations. That is, the social work goal is to interfere with the dysfunctional behavior patterns of depression and aggression of these physically abused foster children which are repeated within the children's lifetime and across generations.

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